



Reply to Iglesias

François Recanati

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Reply to Iglesias

Manuel Iglesias is concerned with the senses (or uses) of 'literal' and 'nonliteral' in ordinary language. The cluster of uses that he finds in ordinary speech is, he says, perfectly in order as it stands. There is no need to reduce some of the senses to others, considered as more fundamental or basic. So Iglesias criticizes the contrast I draw between the technical notion of literality prominent in the philosophy of language (where 'literal' means something like 'determined by the semantic conventions of the language'), and the ordinary notion. According to Iglesias, « all technical notions of 'literal' have correlates in ordinary language », and in any case, « there is no single or paradigmatic ordinary sense ».

I think that Iglesias and I agree on the essentials, so my discussion will be brief. We agree that there are a number of 'layers of meaning' that must be distinguished, each layer corresponding to a different step of interpretation. « Relative to each step », Iglesias says, 'literal' refers to the input of the step of interpretation and 'nonliteral' to the output. » But not all utterances involve all the interpretive steps. For example, some utterances (those that I classify as 'p-literal') do not involve the step from a 'primary' meaning to a 'secondary' meaning derived through e.g. conversational implicature ; utterances of nonindexical sentences do not involve the interpretive step which I call 'saturation', namely the assignment of contextual values to indexical variables ; etc. In order to maintain a common grid of analysis (with a fixed number of interpretive steps) for every utterance, Iglesias suggests that we handle such cases by saying that the output of the (superfluous) step is the same as its input. So for nonindexical sentences the pre-saturation meaning coincides with the post-saturation meaning. In this framework Iglesias makes the following proposal : an utterance is literal (with respect to a given interpretive step) iff the input of the step coincides with its output. So there will be as many senses of 'literal' as there are interpretive steps in the grid.

I welcome the proposal ; so where do Iglesias and I differ ? Well, as I said, he criticizes me for attempting to reduce the plurality of uses of the literal/nonliteral distinction in ordinary speech to a basic core. With respect to the uses that do not correspond to that core, he objects to my dismissing them as technical uses of the distinction. He points out that we find such uses in ordinary speech as much as in the writings of language theorists. And he attempts to show that the alleged core which I discern in the ordinary uses of the literal/nonliteral distinction is based on a condition that is either too weak or too strong to do the work I expect it to do.

The first thing I want to say in response to that criticism is that I am not concerned with the analysis of ordinary usage, appearances notwithstanding. I know that in my paper 'Literal/nonliteral' and in the chapter of *Literal Meaning* which is based on that paper I give that impression by constantly speaking of the ordinary sense of 'literal'. I apologize for that misleading formulation. When I speak of the ordinary sense of 'literal', what I really mean to be talking about is : what is literal (or nonliteral) *for the ordinary user of the language* (rather than for the language theorist). Let me elaborate.

Philosophers of language use 'literal' and 'nonliteral' in a sense which has to do with conformity to the linguistic conventions, at different levels. I hold that the literal/nonliteral distinction, thus understood, is not something which ordinary users of the language spontaneously and systematically pay attention to when they talk or when they process the speech of others. Free enrichment, for example, is pervasive

but passes unnoticed most of the time. It is not perceived as nonliteral, even though technically it is. That is what I mean when I contrast the technical sense and the ordinary sense. An utterance counts as 'nonliteral in the ordinary sense' if and only if it is perceived as such by the ordinary user of the language. An utterance which does not count as 'nonliteral in the ordinary sense' in this framework may still be classified as 'nonliteral' in ordinary speech, in an appropriate context. That is what Iglesias's examples show. But it has never been my intention to deny that the literal/nonliteral distinction which philosophers of language typically invoke can be appealed to also in ordinary speech. I agree with Iglesias that it can, but I think this is irrelevant to my point. My point is that there is a form of nonliterality that is transparent and conscious, and another form that is not. This is the contrast I have in mind, between the technical and the ordinary notion of nonliterality.

But Iglesias does not think that we can make sense of my suggestion that there is a form of nonliterality that corresponds to the users' perception of nonliterality. I draw a distinction between the cases of nonliterality that satisfy the 'transparency condition', i.e., that are perceived as nonliteral by the ordinary users of the language (implicatures, indirect speech acts, figurative uses) and the cases that count as nonliteral only by the theorist's lights (free enrichment, below-threshold loosening and transfer). Iglesias objects that the transparency condition is either too weak or too strong. It is too weak if what we're talking about is *potential* perception, because free enrichment also *can* be perceived as nonliteral, even though normally it is not.¹ It is too strong if what we're talking about is *actual* perception : for even implicatures, he says, are often grasped directly, at a sub-personal level, without being perceived as supplementing the literal meaning of the utterance.

Let me deal with the two sides of the objection in turn. Regarding implicatures, I have already responded to a similar charge in the published version of *Literal Meaning* (distinct from the earlier version which Iglesias used for his presentation at the Granada conference). Even if sometimes implicatures are arrived at 'directly' or (as Grice says) 'intuitively', still they count as implicatures only if the interpreter is aware of the inferential link between the implicature and the speaker's locutionary act. That means that the implicature *must* be perceived as distinct from what is said, thereby satisfying the transparency condition. To sum up : An implicature may be processed sub-personally, as Iglesias says, but even in that case the output of the process must be available to the subject as distinct from what is said (which must also be available).

As regards Iglesias's claim that « meaning enrichment and loosening can also be perceived by language users », I think it is somewhat ambiguous. On a first reading, what is claimed is that an aspect of nonliteral meaning that is not actually perceived as such *could* be so perceived : it would be so perceived if e.g. the speaker had been instructed to pay attention etc. (See Kent Bach on the 'educability' of our intuitions.) On a second reading, what is claimed is that sometimes a primary pragmatic process of enrichment or below-threshold sense extension is *actually* detected by the users. Now the claim is hard to make sense of on this second reading. How could a case of below-threshold sense extension be *actually* detected by the language users, without thereby becoming a case of above-threshold sense extension ? This is a difficulty for Iglesias if he wishes to maintain the objection in this form.

¹ A similar point has been made by Kent Bach and by Jonathan Berg (and also by Carston in her contribution to this volume).

With respect to the first reading, I agree that we can become aware of some nonliteral aspect of the (primary) meaning of an utterance, by exercising our reflective abilities ; but — this is the crucial point —this reflective ability with which we may credit the ordinary user of the language is not constitutive of the ability to communicate at the primary level. Enrichment, loosening, and transfer could still take place even if the language users were deprived of this reflective ability. In the case of implicatures and indirect speech acts, the situation is different : without a modicum of reflective ability, no implicature could ever be derived.

References

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